

Interrogating Factors Affecting Students' Epistemological Access in a South African University

C. Maphosa¹, T. D. Sikhwar², C. Ndebele² and M. Masehela²

¹University of Fort Hare, South Africa

²University of Venda, South Africa

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ABSTRACT The study sought to establish lecturers' views on factors affecting students' performance in one School in a South African University. This qualitative study utilised a case study design in which twenty-three purposefully selected practising lecturers participated in the study. Data were collected through individual interviews with participating lecturers in one School in a rural-based university in South Africa. Interview proceedings were audio-taped, transcribed and analysed. The results were cross-checked with the participants. Data were analysed through content analysis where emerging themes were noted. The study found that there were numerous positive factors that affected students' academic performance that included the existence of some lecturers with teaching qualifications and some who had attended professional development courses in teaching, assessment and moderation, the use of varied ways of presenting module content and effective handling of assessment and feedback. There were also negative factors such as general students' under-preparedness, inability to use available resources, the unavailability of teaching and learning space, laboratories as well as students challenges in academic writing and study skills. The study concludes that positive factors should be tapped to improve student academic performance while negative factors need redress. Recommendations were made in the light of key findings of the study.

INTRODUCTION

Issues of Student Throughput and Drop Out in SA Universities: The higher education system in South Africa has experienced phenomenal growth since the demise of apartheid in 2004. Through a transformation process the university system has been unified through a process of mergers of higher education institutions which resulted in a total of 23 public universities, in addition to other private providers. The expansion of the system which resulted in greater access to higher education by previously marginalised groups has not been matched by good student success rates. A major challenge confronting higher education in South Africa today is the failure to accommodate historically disadvantaged students through the system. As Mdepa and Tshiwula (2012: 22) argue, "the realisation of the ideal of equal opportunity in terms of access and success is, from a number of critical perspectives, still rather a long way off." Referring

to higher education, Badat (2009: 11) states that, "..., throughput rates for 2000- 2004 were between 13% and 14%, and the cohort graduation rate was 45% in 2004, with an overall drop-out rate of 45% Taking account of the Black participation rate, the overall attrition rate of over 50% and the below-average Black completion rates, it can be concluded that the sector is catering successfully for under 5% of the Black (and Coloured) age-group."

In order to reduce these high attrition and dropout rates and improve the graduation rate, it is incumbent upon the higher education sector to understand the nature and extent of students' academic challenges in universities. Breier and Mabizela (2007: 281) also observed that, only 15% of students who enrol in South African universities are able to complete their degree programmes in designated time, whereas "30% drop after the first year and a further 20% drop out after their second or third year." Such an observation is a cause for concern as government invests much in higher education and expects meaningful returns.

The Nature and Extent of Students' Academic Challenges in Universities: A Department of Education study on graduation rates at South African higher education institutions indicated that only 30 per cent of first entering

*Address for correspondence:
Prof. C. Maphosa
University of Fort Hare,
Faculty of Education,
East London Campus,
South Africa
E-mail: maphosacos@yahoo.com

students had graduated after five years of study (Nel et al. 2009). These findings may be an indication that the school system is producing students who are underprepared for higher education studies (Tito et al. in Nel et al. 2009). The researchers argue that the underpreparedness of prospective university students, especially those from historically disadvantaged environments is of great concern because it influences throughput rates. The following are some of the factors affecting learning in higher education.

Inadequate Educational Experience Prior to University Entry: Ciliers and Kilpin (1997) point out that tertiary educational institutions in South Africa face the challenge of assisting historically disadvantaged Black students to cope with the demands of tertiary studies without lowering academic standards. McGill (in Mushishi 1997) indicates that when students arrive at university, they are faced with new learning approaches together with new and challenging sets of instruction approaches. These students are assumed to be independent learners when they are not. The shift from being a dependent learner at high school to an independent student at university may be affecting first entering students' academic performance negatively (McGill, in Mushishi 1997). Moving from high school to tertiary studies involves learning new skills, especially skills which will enable one to cope with the demands of higher education.

Learning Strategies and Other Aspects Related to Studying: According to Cukras (2006), university students face the challenge of understanding assigned tasks, selecting appropriate study strategies for interpreting and reviewing the assigned tasks and self-monitoring their understanding. Cukras (2006) further states that students must develop a number of study strategies that can be selectively utilized to meet the particular demands of the learning material, and maximize their understanding of the material. Du Plessis et al. (1995) view a learning strategy as the way in which cognitive skills are applied in accordance with the demands of a learning task. These authors further emphasize that a student's awareness of learning is an important aspect of academic success and that the difference between a successful and an unsuccessful student is not to be found in the study method used, but rather in the reason why a particular method is applied. It follows that a student should be capable of identifying the demands of the learning

task and of choosing an appropriate learning strategy.

Motivation to Learn: Motivation is regarded as an integral part of learning. The challenge in higher education has always been to stimulate and enhance the motivation of students (Brown et al. 1998). Lack of motivation is one of the most critical factors affecting learning, especially in historically disadvantaged institutions, and lecturers are always seeking ways to encourage all students to do their best in their studies.

Language Competence: Although English has been a medium of instruction in South African schools for many years, students from disadvantaged backgrounds have not fully acquired and grasped the skills of speaking, reading and writing, which are important areas of language competence (Jama et al. 2008). Language competence may therefore, be regarded as another factor affecting the learning ability of students and their academic performance. This study sought to establish if language competence was a factor affecting students' academic performance.

Nature and Extent of Students' Psycho-social Challenges in Universities

Coping with Social and Emotional Demands: The unfamiliarity of a tertiary environment, especially to first entering students, may be a source of anxiety, feelings of insecurity and stress (Snyders et al. 2005). It would therefore, be necessary that students acquire knowledge of the nature and causes of stress in order to cope with stressful situations that may impact negatively on their learning efforts. Entering a new environment also entails building new relationships. According to Snyders et al. (2005) it is only through rewarding relationships that students can fulfill their potential and achieve success. McCombs and Miller (2007) are of the opinion that learning is influenced by social interactions, interpersonal relations, and communication. McCombs and Miller (2007: 57) further state that, "learning can be enhanced when the learner has the opportunity to interact and to collaborate with others on instructional tasks". On student-teacher relationships, McCombs and Miller (2007) emphasize that if students have good relationships with teachers they experience their academic work as meaningful and this promotes their understanding. On the contrary, when stu-

dents experience poor relationships with their teachers, they see their academic work as coercive, irrelevant and not helping them to achieve their academic goals (McCombs and Miller 2007). It is clear from the foregoing discussion that students' challenges may be of non-academic nature and yet affect their academic performance. This study also sought to establish factors affecting students' academic performance and the issue of psycho-social challenges could be part of such factors.

Teaching and Learning Approaches in Universities: In the light of the nature and extent of students' academic and psycho-social challenges (especially students from previously disadvantaged backgrounds) discussed above, it is apparent that the higher education system is faced with a huge challenge in its equity transformational objectives. While higher education institutions have generally blamed the schooling system for the underprepared students they receive, there is need to move beyond the blame game and start putting in place strategies to help the students in universities gain epistemological access to the disciplinary conventions and knowledge structures.

Several options within the control of higher education institutions could be considered. A review of both the curriculum and staff development to improve teaching and learning methodologies come to mind. Scott (2009: 31) argues that there is evidence locally and internationally that institutional ethos and approaches to the education process are a key variable in who succeeds and fails in higher education and that, "In the South African higher education context, a major focus of attention needs to be on developing and implementing mainstream course design and teaching approaches that cater effectively for the realities and diversity of the student body."

In support of developing staff competences to enhance student learning, Niven (2004) cited in van Schalkwyk et al. (2009) suggests that in the face of current evidence on student success, it is necessary for lecturers to consider the possibility of their own under-preparedness, particularly with regards to the increasingly diverse student body that they are being confronted with in the first-year classroom. Van Schalkwyk et al. (2009: 197) further note that, "Having long been accepted members of the discourse community

(insiders), lecturers are often unaware of the challenge that the students experience in trying to negotiate entry into the community and therefore, fail to make explicit underlying and assumed expectations." Constantly engaging in continuing professional development will conscientise the lecturers of some of these tendencies that they are sometimes unaware of. In this regard, Scott (2009: 31) calls for increased status for educational expertise as a key expression of scholarship. The issue of teaching and learning approaches is, therefore, critical in students' attainment. This study sought to find out from lecturers' perspectives the way in which teaching and learning was conducted and how this affected students' academic performance.

Statement of the Problem

Access to higher education is one thing and success is another. Concerns about low graduation rates in the School in which the study was conducted necessitated the carrying out of the study. The study sought to specifically address the question:

What are the lecturers' views on factors that affect students' academic performance in the School?

Lecturers were the ones responsible for teaching students and interacting with them on a daily basis hence the need for the study to look into lecturers' views.

Theoretical Framework

The study was underpinned by Archer's (1996) social realist analytical framework through which the underlying causal mechanisms at the level of the real are analysed using the concepts, structure culture and agency. According to Archer (1995), the social world comprises of the 'parts' (culture and structure) and the 'people' (agency). Boughey and Niven (2012: 643) argue that Archer's work is based on an argument against the tendency in sociological analyses to conflate the structure, culture and agency. The conflation of the three is what is termed the 'epistemic fallacy' (Bhaskar 1978: 16). There is a need to always analyse the three separately as they are separate phenomena that have separate causal affects. Culture, structure and agency each have inherent in them properties and powers that result in causal influences and the interplay of

the three should be clearly understood in order to explain society.

In Archer's social realism theory, structure relates to material resources and to the recurring patterns of social behaviour or to the interrelationship between different elements of society around the distribution of these material resources and patterns of behaviour. These elements of society include social class, gender, race, marriage, education, among others. In an institution of higher learning structure includes things such as policies, committees, educational development centres, as well as more abstract phenomena such as race, gender, social class and knowledge structures in the disciplines. These structures, as Danermark et al. (2002: 181) show, constrain and enable the actions of the agents (for example the educational developers), and in turn, agents reproduce and transform structures.

Culture, in Archer's social realism theory, entails how and what we think about things. This includes values, beliefs, attitudes, ideas, ideologies, theories and concepts which are manifest through discourses used by particular people at particular times (Quinn 2012; Boughey 2010). In a university set-up, agents who include academic staff, academic developers and members of the university management may hold certain views, theories and beliefs which dictate what can have an impact on them and these shape what agents can do (Archer 1995). Institutional policy documents that talk to issues of academic staff development would be an example of the espoused culture of the institution on staff development.

On the other hand, agency refers to the personal and psychological make-up of individuals, their social roles and relates to the capacity people have to act in a voluntary ways (Archer 1996). Agents can play certain functions to change or retain the structural or cultural features they find in an institution. Kinvinen and Piironen (2006: 225) state that the actions of individuals and groups affect social structures by modifying them. Archer (1996) further observes that social structures at a particular moment are a result of the interplay between structure, culture and agency in the past. It is therefore clear that the way agents relate to structural conditions by either changing them or retaining them has an effect on future interactions.

The interplay between structure, culture and agency were solicited as factors affecting students' academic performance.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was wholly qualitative in nature. Shank (2002: 5) defines qualitative research as "a form of systematic empirical inquiry into meaning". Qualitative research is systematic as it follows a well-planned order and empirical in that it is grounded in the world of experience (Shank 2002). *Inquiry into meaning* means that researchers try to understand how others make sense of their experience. Denzin and Lincoln (2000: 3) claim that qualitative research involves an *interpretive and naturalistic* approach: "This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them".

A qualitative paradigm of research was chosen ahead of quantitative one in line with Brown's (2008: 22) observation that:

In contrast to quantitative research in which control and prediction of variables, takes precedence by means of measurement and quantification, in qualitative research meaning and significance of themes take precedence by means of first-hand experiencing and participating.

Qualitative research differs from quantitative research in the sense that it typically operates within the setting where people create and maintain their social world (Neuman 2000: 122). Qualitative research is "idiographic" in nature, aiming to understand the meaning that individuals attach to issues from their own perspectives. It was the sole purpose of this study to ascertain the lived experiences of university lecturers as they revealed their views on factors affecting students' academic performance. Such views were sought from the lecturers' first-hand experience as they were involved in the day-today teaching of students.

A case study design was utilized in the study. Yin (2003) cited in Neale et al. (2006: 3) states that:

A case study is a story about something unique, special, or interesting—stories can be about individuals, organizations, processes, programs, neighbourhoods, institutions, and even events.

This study sought to get in-depth lecturers' views on factors affecting students' academic performance. A case study involves studying a fewer number of participants and gaining insights

into their operation. The purpose is not to test preconceived ideas but to gain understanding. Results are not meant to be generalized but to seek understanding. Case study designs have been used successfully in previous studies. For example, Munikwa et al. (2012) utilized a case study design to explore traditional leaders' views on the nature and causes of parasuicide cases in one district in Zimbabwe while Nkosi (2012) utilized the same design in a study that sought to ascertain how participants viewed male circumcision. It is against this background of previous successful use of the case study design that the present study adopted the same design.

A purposive sample of twenty-three lecturers participated in the study. These were selected from a total lecturer-population of fifty-two. Lecturers in the population held Masters and Doctoral degrees and taught modules at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels. The sample was purposive as it was carefully selected to target information-rich sources (Creswell 2000). Selected lecturers taught at undergraduate level. The targeted lecturers were involved in teaching at the time the study was carried out and had varying years of experiences as lecturers. Main factors considered for the purposive sample were experience in teaching at undergraduate level and lecturers with many years of experience were targeted.

The researchers conducted individual interviews with lecturers. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, coded and analysed. Appointments were made with participants and each interview session lasted about an hour.

Qualitative studies are often criticized for lack of objectivity when compared to quantitative ones (Onwuegbuzie and Leech 2007). Lincoln and Guba (1985: 296) state that the aim of trustworthiness in a qualitative research is to support the argument that the study's findings are "worth paying attention to." In view of this, the researcher took a number of measures to enhance the trustworthiness of data collected by paying special attention to credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability.

a) Credibility– Merriam (1999: 6) states that, equated to internal validity in positivism, credibility in qualitative studies deals with the question, "How congruent are the findings with reality?" Credibility entails truth value. To ensure credibility we employed two strategies namely member checking and debriefing.

b) Transferability– Merriam (1996: 36) comments transferability is equivalent to external validity in scientific studies and "is concerned

with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations." In enhancing transferability we made use of one email with the same questions to all the participants. Email responses were downloaded and filed and form the audit trail to give other researchers the ability to transfer findings of this study to similar studies.

c) Dependability– Dependability entails repeatability. To enhance dependability the interview protocol used in collecting data was subjected to scrutiny by an expert in teaching and learning in the light of what the study sought to achieve. Two lecturers, not included in the final sample, participated in pre-testing the data collection instrument to ascertain the usability of the questions.

d) Confirmability – Confirmability entails neutrality or objectivity. The researchers solely made use of participants' responses to arrive at conclusions hence there was no interference.

Data were analysed thematically through content analysis. Data from interviews were coded, categorized and analysed into themes. The following themes were utilized for data presentation and discussion.

Informed consent was sought from participants after the purpose of the study was explained to them.

RESULTS

Lecturers' Views on Factors Affecting Students' Academic Performance

Table 1 summarises the findings from the interviews carried out with lecturers in terms of structural, cultural and agential factors enabling or constraining students' academic performance.

Lecturers' Views Presented Thematically

a) Module Content

On the issues pertaining to module content, lecturers interviewed had a combination of positive and negative views as shown on Table 1. Some of the verbatim quotations are captured below:

Lecturer A

The science module content offered in the school of Maths and Natural Sciences is not in line with the needs in the School of Agric. This is creating problems.

Table 1: Lecturers' views on structural, cultural and agential factors affecting students' academic performance

<i>Archerian category</i>		<i>Enabling factors</i>	<i>Constraining factors</i>
<i>Structure</i>	Teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Teaching expertise drawn from teaching experience - Teaching improved through feedback from students' evaluation - Some lecturers attended moderators and assessor's courses - Some lecturers held teaching qualifications - Use of varied teacher centred approaches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lecturers without teaching qualifications - Individual differences in teaching - Absence of short courses attended on teaching approaches - Absence of peer evaluation exercises - Students' evaluation of teaching not compulsory
	Module content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Use of different ways of presenting content 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' challenges with academic discourse - Students challenges with mastery of content in higher level modules
	Resources and infrastructure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Availability of key textbooks required 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students failure to utilise available books - Inadequate or no equipment in laboratories - Challenges of teaching space - Challenges of equipment such as projectors for PowerPoint presentation
<i>Culture</i>	Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timeous feedback provided to students - Marked assignments and tested discussed with students upon 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Failure to discuss marked work with student providing feedback - Failure to use feedback from marked work to identify students with academic challenges
	Lecturers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Available for consultation - Staff development programmes attended prior to joining the present university 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students failing to utilise consultation time - No School-based professional development programmes on teaching and learning
<i>Agency</i>	Students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Some students work hard - Some students do their own reading and are motivated to learn - Problems with psycho-social problems referred for counselling - Students largely computer literate - Language of instruction not a problem 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students' unwillingness to work as independent learners - Students experience psycho-social challenges which negatively affect their academic performance - Challenges with service modules offered in other Schools - Inadequate students' preparation in high school - Copying and pasting assignments from web sources - Students over reliance on lecturer input-Challenges in academic discourse
	Career counselling and career opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Students informed of career opportunities in programmes of study - Availability of site visits 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Evidence of students registering without proper career guidance

Lecturer B

Students do not have background in some of the modules and this negatively affects their mastery of module content.

Lecturer C

I give a lot of support material to assist students in understanding module content.

b) Teaching Approaches

Interviewees' responses on their views on teaching approaches basically pointed out at ways in which they teach that promote or hinder meaningful learning as demonstrated by some verbatim quotations below:

Lecturer D

I use different approaches to present the module content to students. I lecture and also allow students to research and present.

Lecturer E

I always use power point presentation but I have to carry my laptop and data projector whenever I go for lectures.

Lecturer F

I have introduced prizes for best performing students for my students and this encourages them to work hard and to compete.

c) Professional Development Programmes

Through the use of interviews, the researchers sought to establish the presence of professional development programmes and responses reflected the absence of such programmes in the School as evidenced by what some of the interviewed lecturers said:

Lecturer F

I did a course in moderation and assessment at the University of X before I joined this university.

Lecturer G

I have not attended any staff development programme on teaching and learning ever since I joined this School.

Lecturer H

There are no staff development programmes on teaching and learning organised in this School but such programmes are important in assisting us as lecturers.

d) Assessment Approaches

The researchers sought to establish if the issue of assessment negatively affected students' academic performance but from the responses as attested to by the responses, assessment issues were well-handled.

Lecturer A

My classes are quite small I am able to mark assessment tasks and provide students with feedback in time.

Lecturer D

I provide students with detailed comments in marked work.

Lecturer F

I do not have time to discuss marked work with students.

e) Students' Academic Challenges

The issue of students' academic challenges was investigated with the view of identifying the nature of such challenges and how they affected students' performance and varied views on nature and extent of challenges were raised by the interviews.

Lecturer B

Students just depend on the notes that I give them and in tests all they do is cram and reproduce the notes.

Lecturer C

The use of English is not a problem. Students are able to follow the lecture presented in English

Lecturer E

We seem not to have students who are strong in Maths and Science and they have problems in modules that require calculations

f) Students' Non-academic Challenges

Interviewees also revealed a number of students' non-academic challenges as indicated in some of the responses.

Lecturer C

Through a decline in performance one can tell that a student is experiencing social problems.

Lecturer F

I talked to one student and she confided in me that she had a serious problem with her boyfriend and this negatively affected her studies.

Lecturer A

Some students apparently engage in some part-time jobs to supplement their income while at the same time they are full-time students at the university.

f) Career Opportunities

The issue of career opportunities was solicited against the realisation that if students are not aware of clear career opportunities in their programme of study they may not be motivated to pursue the degree programme. Interviewees' responses generally indicated that students were made aware of existing career opportunities.

Lecturer C

All our students easily get employed after completion of their studies.

Lecturer H

We have cases of students who actually get jobs while on attachment long before completion of their degree programmes.

Lecturer J

We make students aware of available employment opportunities so as to encourage them to work hard.

g) Materials and Resources

The researchers solicited for lecturers' views on the availability and adequacy of materials and resources as important structural issues. Responses indicated some serious challenges on materials and resources as shown in some of the responses.

Lecturer G

There is a problem of teaching and learning facilities in the School. I actually use my office to teach some Honours students.

Lecturer H

Some resource materials that we need for experiments on Food Science are not always readily available.

Lecturer J

We need proper laboratories that are well-equipped.

The verbatim quotations of interviewees as captured from the interviews served the purpose of establishing in lecturers' own words their views and experiences of factors affecting students' academic performance.

DISCUSSION

Among the negative factors affecting students' academic performance, the study found that the students had challenges in language of the discipline which is termed academic literacy. Lebowitz (1994) narrowly defined academic literacy as one's ability to read and write effectively within the college context in order to proceed from one level to another. In a more broader sense, implies the students' ability to read and write within the academic context with independence, understanding and a level of engagement with the learning. The finding that students experience academic literacy challenges is consistent with a view by Parkinson et al. (2008: 14) who

state that: *Academic writing includes the ability to master the favoured genres of the discipline and to adhere to acceptable conventions, as well as the ability to develop and sustain an argument.*

Parkinson et al. (2008) further observe that students experience academic literacy challenges because they may have attended schools which provided inadequate opportunities for writing and reading. This observation is true of the students enrolled in the university in which the present study was carried out, a historically disadvantaged and rural based one.

The study also found that there were no opportunities for staff development existing in the School in which the study was conducted. Academic staff members with teaching qualifications and those who had attended staff development workshops in teaching and learning had done so elsewhere prior to joining the current university. The need for continuous staff development especially in the area of teaching and learning is advocated for by Scott et al. (2007) who categorically state that there is need for academic staff members in different departments in universities to be trained and be equipped with teaching skills. Taylor (2003: 75) also stresses the need for professional development, which he describes as "the catalyst which allows the evolutionary process to move forward less catastrophically..." Lecturers should be offered training and support through their Faculties, Schools and Departments to improve their teaching skills.

The issue of lack of perceived thorough preparedness of students to deal with university studies was also established in the study. This alludes to the gap that exists between high school and university, which borders on under-preparedness of students from the school system. This finding is consistent with Fisher's (2011: 35) contention that;

There is a strong perception that the higher education intake is increasingly characterised by the academic under-preparedness of school-leavers, and that this is a key factor behind the throughput rates in higher education generally.

What is clear from the above assertion is that universities recruit students who are not adequately prepared for the rigors of university studies, hence the challenges of low academic performance, poor pass rates, graduation and throughput rates as well as high dropout rates.

The Council on Higher Education (2010) further observes that the gap between school and university is evident in students' failure to cope with intensity of the work, rapid progression from one set of concepts to another as well as the inability to independently plan and monitor own studies. Fisher (2011) also states that, in view of the new Matric syllabus, Matric points are no longer a reliable predictor of how one is prepared for university studies, yet, sadly, universities base their admission criteria on Matric points.

The study established that language did not play a part in students' low academic performance. The interviewees could not confirm the issue of language as a real challenge despite the fact that most, if not all students in the School were second language speakers of English and tuition was offered on English. This finding refutes earlier findings by Fisher (2011) that problems in low throughput in Engineering degree programmes in South African degree had 1 language factor. Fisher (2011: 59) states that;

Language is, in a number of senses, an important dimension of the institutional climate and culture discussed above. Language is part of the culture and identity of institutions, and a strong factor in students' choice of university, as well as a means of -or barrier to -communication, and access to knowledge.

The significance of language as an important factor in students' learning and resultant attainment is, therefore, underlined. The use of a foreign language as a medium of instruction is bound to cause problems to students. The Council on Higher Education (2010: 105) states that, 'at the heart of the challenge of access to knowledge and student success..., for Black and white students alike, lies the problem of language.'

The study also established that students' academic performance was negatively affected by poor study habits. Wolfe (2010) observes that study skills are very significant for academic success at college and university levels where students thrive on independent learning. Similarly, Fielden (2004) contends that good study habits help the students in critical reflection in skills outcomes such as selecting, analysing, critiquing and synthesising. This is in line with Mace's (2002) explanation of study as a systematic acquisition of knowledge and an understanding of facts and principles that calls for retention and application. If it is to be effective, studying cannot be done in a haphazard manner. The im-

portance of good and effective study habits cannot be overemphasised. Osa-Edoh and Alutu (2012) argue that students may not effectively study because they are not exposed to relevant and useful study techniques.

It also emerged from the study that some students appeared to have registered for some degree programmes without proper career guidance, hence they lacked both the ability and interest on the chosen programme of study resulting in poor achievement. Tsukuda (1988) cited in Mochizuki (2011: 68) states that:

Career guidance is an intervention activity in relation to the process of choosing a career path, and thus is a form of support.

It is clear that as an intervention, career guidance should be properly planned and implemented. This will assist students to make informed decisions and choose degree programmes they have ability and interest in. This will go a long way in assisting them to have a sustained interest in the programme.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study indicate that from the lecturers' points of view there were several positive and negative factors affecting students' academic performance. Positive factors included the existence in the School of some lecturers with teaching qualifications and some who had attended professional development courses in teaching, the availability of required textbooks in the library, the use of different teaching approaches to enhance students' understanding and the provision of immediate and useful feedback to students after assessment. The negative factors included the offering of modules in some Schools yet these modules were deemed difficult and not related to agriculture, the general under preparedness of students, poor study habits and perceived lack of seriousness with their studies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of the findings of the study, the followings recommendations are made;

- ♦ The offering of modules across Schools should be revisited to ensure that modules students take from other Schools are related to the Agriculture degree they would be pursuing.

- ♦ Career guidance should form an integral part of the students' registration process when entering the University to ensure that students are properly directed to register for degree programmes in line with their interests and abilities.
- ♦ The School should put in place staff development programmes in liaison with the Centre for Higher Education Teaching and Learning. Such programmes will assist lecturers with basic teaching, moderation and assessment skills.
- ♦ The School should also liaise with subject librarians in the University library to ensure that students are given information literacy skills to enable them to fully utilise materials in the library.
- ♦ The School should also liaise with the Teaching and Learning Centre for the offering of a series of academic writing and study skills workshops to all first-years in the first semester of every year.
- ♦ Lecturers with teaching qualifications and those who have attended professional development courses in assessment and moderation should be asked to offer periodic School-based staff development workshops.
- ♦ The provision and equipping of requisite laboratories should be prioritised in the School.
- ♦ The provision of adequate teaching and learning space and teaching equipment in the form of fixed data projectors in lecture rooms should also be prioritized in the School.
- ♦ The provision of course outlines and study guides to students should be made compulsory for all modules taught in the School.
- ♦ Systematic monitoring of students' academic performance should be put in place to identify 'at risk' students on time and put in place appropriate intervention measures such as mentoring and supplemental instruction.

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The study solely looked at factors affecting students' academic performance from the point of view of lecturers in one School in one university, hence the results may be generalised to other universities with similar conditions with caution. The results provide insight into happenings in the University in which the study was carried

out. Future related studies may look at all Schools in one university or even make comparative studies across universities by broadening the participants to include students, non-teaching staff and employers.

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